

How social recruitment requires students to manage a responsible digital footprint

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Abstract

Today's students are ideal candidates for recruitment via social media. As members of the Generation Y cohort that is almost always connected to the internet, these students are, however, particularly at risk of overlooking the professional impact of their digital footprint, a visible online record of all their comments and other content ever posted on the internet. As such, research has indicated that digital footprints containing images and comments displaying substance abuse, badmouthing, profanity and other offensive content, are reasons to dismiss the suitability of such students as job candidates. While social recruitment has become a mainstream channel for employers to select talent, literature suggests that students remain ignorant of how their digital footprint may jeopardize potential employers' perceptions and thus such students' capacity to secure internships and job placements. Although several studies have been conducted about students' irresponsible social media habits, there is a dearth of literature on interventions that have successfully sensitised students to maintain responsible digital footprint. The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate current literature in order to explore how co-operative and work integrated learning practices and programmes may support students in cultivating a responsible digital footprint.

Introduction

Students easily neglect to consider how their digital footprint (Colfer, 2011, p. 2, "Empower your students and yourself as digital citizens," 2012), a visible history of their online conduct, may impact future career prospects. Furthermore, the increasing use of social recruitment (Sewell, Martin, Barnett & Jenter, 2011) whereby potential employers recruit and screen job candidates through the use of social media, places a greater responsibility on students to keep their digital footprint clean. Problematic profile content (Peluchette & Karl, 2009) and social media posts that

reveal unsavoury personality characteristics (Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009) have documented consequences for internship opportunities and job placements. As a result, a responsible digital footprint (Kane, 2012, p. 7) is imperative for positive professional online reputation management. Moreover, as social recruitment is increasing in popularity with the growth in social media adoption, it becomes imperative for co-operative and work integrated learning (WIL) practices and programmes to sensitise and support students in cultivating a responsible digital footprint.

The prevalence of social media usage among WIL students in the Generation Y cohort

Demographically, traditional college-aged WIL students fall within the Generation Y cohort. Accessibility to digital media is taken for granted by those born between 1979 and 2001, the so-called Generation Y or Millennial Generation (Connaway, Radford, Dickey, De Angelis Williams & Confer, 2008, p.125; Kennedy et al, 2007; Short & Reeves, 2009; Sweeney, 2006, p.1, Visa, 2012). Stated differently, Generation Y is history's first "always connected" generation (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.1). In fact, they cannot remember a world before YouTube or Google; hence Generation Y is commonly referred to as the iPod, Facebook or YouTube generation constantly connected via smart phones or laptops (Visa, 2012, p.2). A global study by Visa (2012, p.7) found that 82% of the members of this generation use their computers to access the internet and 62% use their computers to specifically access social media. When accessing social media, 40% use their mobile phones and 80% access Facebook at least once a week.

Dominick (2011, p.25) defines social media as "...online communications that use special techniques that involve participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration, and linkage." Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011, p.241) describe social media as mobile and web-based technologies used to create interactive platforms where communities and individuals co-create, modify, discuss and share user-generated content. Typically, the co-creation of content occurs in blogs, wikis, photo sharing sites such as Flickr, and microblogging site Twitter (Kligienė & Rapečka, 2011, p. 34). Social networking pertains to sites such as Facebook, whereas the sharing of taste and relevance typically involves online retailer sites such as Amazon. Considering the high prevalence of social media usage among WIL students as members of the Generation Y cohort, they are a particularly suited target for social recruitment.

The benefits of social recruitment for students and potential employers

For both job candidates and employers, the popularity of social media provides several benefits compared to relying on the traditional recruitment process. The incorporation of social media in the recruitment process is called social recruitment. Social recruiting is defined by Jacobs (2009, p. 3) as “sound hiring decisions by actively using web-based technologies to build a shared understanding between employers / recruiters and passive and active job seekers.” Social media, particularly platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, provides search functionalities whereby recruiters can easily target and locate candidates that meet specific skills and other requirements (Sheehan, 2010).

Already, social recruitment has become a mainstream channel for employers as 83% are actively involved in or planning to utilize social recruitment (Jobvite, 2010). A global study by Kelly (2012) found that 41% of employees and candidates rely on social media when making career choices while 32% of Generation Y prefers social media to traditional methods. A related social recruiting study by Jobvite (2012) found that 83% of the workforce make use of Facebook, while 46% rely on Twitter and 41% are actively involved in LinkedIn. In total, 16% of the workforce attributes their current employment to social media (Jobvite, 2011).

Social recruiting provides several benefits. Both candidates and employers can use social media to market themselves, digitize referrals, conduct research, connect with those who have similar interests and goals and voice their intentions and needs (Jobvite,2010). Another benefit for both candidates and recruiters is the ability to engage with job seekers in niche talent communities and their wider connections (Jacobs, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, the interactivity of social media showcases candidates’ communication and personality characteristics which allows recruiters to source better quality candidates (Sheehan, 2010). A major advantage of social recruiting is the ability to source top talent in more targeted, cost-effective and efficient ways (Madia, 2011). In the process a broader geographical audience becomes accessible (Jacobs, 2009, p. 2; Madia, 2011). At the same time, the ability to access a candidate’s digital footprint further enhances the ability to screen for and dismiss unsuitable candidates.

Establishing a digital footprint

As the internet has increasingly become a network for both personal and professional interactions, almost every user has a digital footprint (Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009; Naish, 2012). An internet user’s data trail, known as a digital footprint, comprises all the online posts connected to user’s name online (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007). Ryan (2011) defines a

digital footprint as all the information about a person that is available online. Sources of a digital footprint include content posted on social networks, internet profiles created either by an internet user or by an employer and association sites, message board posts, blogs and chats. Stated differently, a digital footprint or digital tattoo (Colfer, 2011) is all the information found about a person when using a search engine such as Google to extract information from different sources (Naish, 2012). As such, some people's digital footprints are said to be impressive while others may be potentially embarrassing. It appears that the latter possibility is of little concern, given the research results of the Pew Internet Project (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007), which indicated that 61% of internet users are not concerned about their digital footprint.

Screening job candidates' digital footprint through social recruitment

Considering the competitive business environment and economic conditions, employers are increasingly under pressure to employ the best talent (Willmer, 2009, p. 10). It has become common practice for employers to assess a potential candidate's digital footprint before making final appointment decisions (Associated Press 2012; Barnett, 2012; Betances, Solarczyk, & Bellows, 2012; Brandenburg, 2007; Kane, 2012, p. 7; Ryan, 2012). A study by Betances, Solarczyk, and Bellows (2012) found that 39% of recruiting managers use social networking sites to screen potential candidates.

Some candidates' social media profiles, manifested through their histories of social interaction, may be helpful when recruiters assess skills, work-related interests, professional experience, competencies and communication skills and possibly even personality traits required of a particular position. However, other candidates have been spurned as potential employees for having posted inappropriate material on their profiles (Barnett, 2012; Betances, Solarczyk, & Bellows, 2012; Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010). In addition to screening according to sets of job-related criteria, recruiters are also encouraged to verify whether information is presented consistently across social media profiles and without any discrepancies when compared to a candidate's actual resume (Madia, 2011).

Membership of offensive online networks is also a concern (Betances, Solarczyk, & Bellows, 2012). These may include well-documented groups or pages that are seen to encourage rape, racism, violence and sexual promiscuity on campus (Chen, 2011; Facebook, 2013a; Facebook, 2013b; Facebook, 2013c; Masciarelli, 2009).

A social recruiting study by Jobvite (2012) and a related study by Betances, Solarczyk and Bellows (2012) compared employers' areas of concern found on candidates' digital footprint originating from social media (see summary provided in Table 1). These areas of concern dismiss the potential suitability of candidates. In fact, 11% of employers dismissed the suitability of candidates based on their digital footprints originating from social media (Betances, Solarczyk, & Bellows, 2012).

Table 1: Areas of concern in candidates' digital footprint

Area of concern	Jobvite (2012)	Betances, Solarczyk and Bellows (2012)
Substance abuse		70%
Poor communication skills		61%
Badmouthing a company, boss, customer or colleague		56%
Provocative or inappropriate photographs		41%
Profanity	23%	
Spelling and grammar	23%	
Level of professionalism	20%	
Religious sentiment	17%	
Photos related to alcohol	16%	
Illegal drugs	7%	
Sexual content	7%	

While a digital footprint is a public record of a candidate's private thoughts on topics such as religion and politics as well as membership to online groups, Egan (2012) and Betances, Solarczyk and Bellows (2012) warn of the risk for employers to discriminate against a potential candidate. More alarming, however, are widespread incidents where employers request Facebook usernames and passwords from candidates during job interviews in order to view information that may otherwise not be publically available (Associated Press, 2012; Barnett, 2012; Egan, 2012; Poulos, 2012). Whilst a request to surrender passwords is regarded as an invasion of privacy (Barnett, 2012; Ryan, 2012) and a violation of Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities (Egan, 2012), candidates may still feel compelled to do so, considering job scarcity during tough economic times (Associated Press, 2012; Poulos, 2012). Although legislation was recently passed in the United States of America to prohibit current or prospective employers to request social media passwords (Levy, 2012), employers have resorted to asking candidates to log into their social media profiles on a company computer during an interview or to befriend human resources managers to circumvent legislation and social media privacy settings (Associated Press, 2012).

Preparing the WIL student to manage a responsible digital footprint

Students neglect to consider that social media privacy settings, whether activated or not, are insufficient protection from employers' view considering the vast extent of their friendship networks that may access, copy, paste and forward content (Brandenburg, 2007; "Empower your students and yourself as digital citizens," 2012). Furthermore, advanced search engine technologies make it possible to access a detailed digital footprint (Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010). By keeping a searchable record of student applicants' digital footprint, the internet remains a public medium where privacy has ceased to exist emphasizing the need to continuously monitor and manage their professional reputation online (Brancatella, 2008, p. 1; Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009; Willmer, 2009, p. 10).

Bearing in mind the consequences of a digital footprint on internship opportunities and job placements (Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009), it is recommended that that students regularly perform search engine searches to view internet content associated with their names (Willmer, 2009, p. 10). A study conducted by the Pew Internet Project (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007) concluded that although 60% of internet users indicated that they are not concerned about their digital footprint, 47% of users have searched for information about themselves online. A related study by Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey and Budden (2010) found that 50.7% of students were not aware that employers or recruiters can view their digital footprint while 10% claimed that they have posted content that they would not want employers to view. Similarly, a study by Cain, Scott and Akers (2009) concluded that a third of students have posted content that they would not want employers to view.

In order to manage a responsible digital footprint, student applicants are advised to remove unwanted content and damaging references themselves, by contacting site administrators or to approach the services of professional organisations that specialise in cleaning up digital footprints (Willmer, 2009, p. 10). A study by Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey and Budden (2010) found that 70% of students have removed unwanted content from their digital footprints in contrast to a study by Madden, Fox, Smith and Vitak (2007) who found that only 38% of internet users have taken steps to clean up their digital footprints.

Another way in which to manage a responsible digital footprint is to be selective about blogs, message boards, forums, social media networks and friends a student chooses to engage and to carefully consider how content can be interpreted by others (Willmer, 2009, p. 10). A golden rule for students is to avoid posting anything online that they do not want a potential employer to

see (Brancatella, 2008, p. 12). In other words, it may be wise for Generation Y internet users to anticipate what values may be regarded as important by employers and occupations and to then align their personal values to expected values to avoid incongruence (cf. Colfer, 2011).

Available literature suggests that co-operative and work integrated learning practices and programmes need to consider several aspects in preparing students to manage a responsible digital footprint. Considerations (Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009; Peluchette & Karl, 2009); Sewell, Martin, Barnett, & Jenter, 2011) include responsible digital footprint education and sensitisation during freshman orientation, campus awareness campaigns, student codes of conduct, mentoring, information technology policies and guidance by career and placement staff. Appropriate examples of responsible digital footprint initiatives include those posted on the websites of the Career Services Center at University of Delaware (2012) and Cornell University (Mitrano, 2006). Social media guidelines for students are also published on the websites of the University of Newcastle (2011), the University of Texas at Austin (2013), the University of California (2013), the University of Adelaide (2013), and several others. Similarly, the Indiana University ran a campus awareness campaign whereby "I Facebooked you!" flyers were distributed to students (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2006; Gershon, 2010, p. 168).

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the activation of social media profile privacy settings and membership to online groups that enjoy protected visibility, the internet remains a public space with the technology available to locate anyone's digital footprint. In an increasingly competitive business environment, social recruiters progressively rely on screening job applicants' digital footprint to perform background checks and to avoid making costly appointment mistakes. While a professional digital footprint may assist students in locating suitable internships and permanent appointments, offensive content is sufficient reason to dismiss a candidate. As such, students need to be taught how to continuously monitor and manage their professional reputation online.

Considering the extensive internet usage of Generation Y students, it is imperative for co-operative and work integrated learning practices and programmes to support students in cultivating a responsible digital footprint. It is recommended that sensitisation commences at freshman (first year) orientation and that it extends to curriculum content, policies and campus awareness campaigns. Unfortunately literature scarcely reports on interventions that have successfully sensitised students to maintain responsible digital footprint and it is recommended

that further research be conducted to establish benchmarks and best practice on responsible digital footprint interventions.

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